

# The Changing Face of Stamp Printing

Glenn H Morgan

---

The type of company, location of printer and features incorporated into a stamp is going through a period of dramatic change.

Traditionally, Great Britain was responsible for the production of most British Empire stamps prior to the current monarch. With the establishment of the British Commonwealth, things stayed the same for many years, but more recently this position has altered.

The bigger Commonwealth nations had already set-up their own stamp production capacity. The likes of Australia, Canada and South Africa were largely able to manage their own stamp requirements. However, the smaller countries continued to be almost totally dependent on Britain well into this reign.

As the United Kingdom aligned more closely with its European neighbours on the continent and as developing countries advanced, there has been less dependency, or sense of loyalty, towards Britain. This has resulted in a gradual, but steady, change in the client lists of British stamp printers.

Major British printers of stamps such as Perkins Bacon, Waterlow, Bradbury Wilkinson and Format International have all ceased to exist as companies in their own right, largely being swallowed-up by others. Waddingtons of Kirkstall and, for a long time prior to their acquisition of Harrisons, even De La Rue, had pulled out of stamp printing. Indeed, when Guernsey decided to celebrate its famed islander Thomas De La Rue they chose to use a Dutch company, Enschedé, to undertake the printing.

Of the British stamp printers that still exist, a brief overview proves interesting. De La Rue is active again, following the Harrisons buyout. However, it is rare to see them responsible for stamps of any country other than Great Britain. Even here, they do not have the sole printing contract, but do have a large slice of the British Post Office's output. They share the print runs with two other British printers and one European.

The House of Questa has seen its portfolio of clients change over the years. They are still a major supplier to Royal Mail and produce fine quality printing – including stamps printed by SuperLitho, a process they developed that uses an extremely fine screen to guarantee superb detailing of the image. They were taken over a while ago by a Canadian company called MDC Stamp and Ticket Group.

Walsall Security Printers first became involved in stamp printing in the 1960s for Tonga and Sierra Leone producing freeform and round self-adhesive stamps. They were, in fact, way ahead of their time, as self-adhesive stamps are only recently gaining a strong foothold in the more traditional water-activated arena. A supplier to Royal Mail and many other countries, they started to get involved in banknote

manufacturing in the late 1990s as an attempt at diversifying into an allied area. They employed offset lithography, rather than the more traditional intaglio printing process, as this satisfied a niche market.

(Interestingly, Harrisons also moved into banknotes and they soon became a thorn in the side of De La Rue, gaining around 5% of the world market. One of the first things that DLR did when they took over Harrisons was to close down banknote production at High Wycombe and move it to its plant at Gateshead!)

Printing is, without doubt, still a skilled profession. However, technology has moved forward at such a rate in the past few years, that it is now easier and cheaper to set-up a print works in a country not used to, or previously capable, of printing its own stamps. Generally, the smaller the country, the smaller the print run and so a set of commemorative stamps could easily be printed in a working day, say a couple of shifts.

A good example of this trend is Barbados, who now use the local COT Printery for the production of many of its stamps – and a fine printer they are proving to be. Now that they have been established for a few years, they are being awarded contracts from neighbouring and more distant countries. Potentially this will take yet more business away from Britain.

Moving to the non-Commonwealth countries, the break-up of the former Soviet Union and the creation of a “new Europe” could have resulted in a bonanza period for the British printer. In general terms, this has not proved to be the case. Certainly on the banknote front, De La Rue has secured many contracts to print currency, but no stamp contracts are believed to have come to Britain from Eastern Europe.

What has tended to happen is that countries have set-up their own stamp printing works. There are now at least five state-run or private printers in the former USSR – the latest to start operations being based in Belarus. It is very often a matter of national pride to be able to claim that postage stamps are a “home-grown” product. Whereas banknotes are less easy to print and demand resources not always on hand, such as engravers and intaglio presses. It is also phenomenally expensive to create a banknote production printing facility, unlike with stamps.

All you need to print stamps is a second-hand sheet-fed litho printing press, pre-press kit, a supply of gummed paper, ink to print with and machines to perforate and guillotine each sheet of stamps. Yes, it is acknowledged that this gives a totally simplistic approach to the production of stamps, but there is not much more to it than that. Certainly, it gets more complicated when allowing for automated sorting machine phosphors, security inks, anti-counterfeiting features, unique die-cuts, etc., but as a country advance technically, so will the skills available to it.

In the more developed countries, it is very often the price of a print job that will now determine who gets the business. In the USA, the Bureau of Engraving and Printing is losing out to the private sector. Its annual reports in recent years show a dramatic drop in production as capacity moves away from this government-run organisation. The likes of Avery Dennison, Banknote Corporation of America (French owned) and Sennett continue to increase their share of production.

Indeed, to show how complex printing of USPS stamps now is, there follows an entry from a new issue press release:

“Printing: Stamps printed for **American Bank Note Company** on a leased Champlain gravure press at **J. W. Fergusson and Sons**, Richmond, Virginia, under the supervision of **Sennett Enterprises**, Fairfax, Virginia. Stamps perforated, processed and shipped by **ABNC**, Bedford Park, Illinois.”

The change to self-adhesive postage stamps has also helped to change the balance in determining what company gets the work. In some countries, such as the USA and Australia, the requirement for water-activated stamps is decreasing at a huge annual rate – to the point where self-adhesive will be the only “option” in a few years time, or less. The position in the UK is destined to follow this trend.

For those interested in the manufacturing of postage stamps, we live in interesting times. A whole range of new names is constantly being added to the new issue listings of “stamp printers” in philatelic magazines. Indeed, in the past five years alone I have recorded over 35 new names worldwide.

The difference between today and years gone by is that the printers are tending to be private, previously established companies who also produce other security print items, or are commercial printers venturing into new areas. It would be rare (and brave!) for a new company to be formed solely to print postage stamps, as the market is not large enough to keep the presses rolling.

For approaching 150 years, there were almost no changes in how a stamp visually appeared and was used. This is no longer the case. Who knows what future innovations will cause even more new names to be added to the roll of stamp printers as the once humble stamp evolves into something far more inter-active?

We have seen stamps that are:

- peelable without the need to lick (self-adhesive substrate),
- in a free-form shape, such as bottles and butterflies (die-cut separation),
- three-dimensional (using special red/green glasses),
- stereoscopic (two images that somehow merge when viewed a certain way),
- smelling of roses or chocolate (aromatic inks),
- computer generated at vending site (Frama labels and their like),
- with chunks missing, such as a jigsaw piece (die-cut out of traditional stamp),
- ATM vendable (plastic and paper developed to resemble a banknote),
- capable of changing colour (thermochromic inks),
- with hidden images, such as bats, revealed with a decoder (scrambled indicia),
- multi-hole punched in a pattern (perforation pins closely positioned),
- with micro-text printing visible only with magnifying glass (security feature),
- light reflective (holographic substrates and OVI inks),
- sponsored by corporations, such as McDonalds (often with their logo’s),
- able to be coloured-in by hand (simply ‘colouring by numbers’),
- perforated with non-circular pins, such as star and elipse shapes,
- scratchable, hiding messages or images below the surface (latex covered),
- personalised with photographs (colour laser overprinted on traditional stamp tabs),

- on continuous self-adhesive coils minus backing sheet (as rolls of Sellotape),
- digitally printed in their entirety by Fuji-Xerox colour office printers.

Only a year or so back, Switzerland announced the production of a stamp produced of embroidery in a limited edition. Clearly, the company concerned for its production would never have dreamt that they would one day manufacture stamps.

Such innovative ideas indicated above, plus others, would have been unthinkable, or unachievable, even a short time ago, helping to make stamp collecting so fascinating and rewarding. It will also probably keep the purveyors of doom-and-gloom at bay and the hobby alive well into this new millennium.

*Footnote: As I write this article, Swiss company Hélio Courvoisier has announced that it is closing down due to: "too much competition in the international market". A sad loss, but it helps to illustrate that there are always losers, as well as winners.*

*Enschede has recently lost the production of all Dutch stamps, but has gained the production of all of Norway's output; whilst our very own Walsall has just won the entire Dutch PTT contract. Changing times indeed.*

*(1690 words.)*